

Pros and Cons of Moving Lighthouses

Recently, there has been much publicity over moving several lighthouses in an effort to save them from impending dangers such as erosion. Relocating lighthouses is not a modern phenomenon. When the Lighthouse Establishment approved the first Sharps Island Lighthouse, built in 1837 in Chesapeake Bay, the plans called for a small wooden keeper's house surmounted with a lantern and designed with "wheels" so it could be easily moved in the event that erosion threatened the structure. The lighthouse was so moved in 1848, presumably on these wheels.

With advances in building technology, cast-iron-plate towers were designed so they could be dis-

assembled and re-erected as needed on shifting and eroding beaches. The pre-fabricated curved cast-iron panels were easily bolted together or dismantled. Cape Canaveral Lighthouse (1868) in Florida, and Hunting Island Lighthouse (1875) in South Carolina, are examples of this design, both subsequently being successfully moved.

The National Park Service has conducted studies which conclude the safest method to preserve Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, presently being threatened by erosion, is to move it back from the beach front. Ironically, some citizens argue such a move will destroy the integrity of the lighthouse setting. Actually, when the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse was built in 1870, it was located approximately one-half mile inland to protect it from beach erosion. But erosion of the beach has encroached to the point where it now endangers the structure. The inland movement of the lighthouse and its other station structures would in reality reflect the setting of the lighthouse as it appeared when it was first completed.

Should a lighthouse be moved? The best answer is "no," unless the structure is threatened by destruction. While any historic structure is best in its original location, a historic structure in a non-original location is better than no historic structure at all. If a move is necessary to save the structure, every effort should be made to maintain as much of the original station integrity as possible. The lighthouse tower should normally have the same orientation to the water as it had before the move. Other station structures should be similarly moved to demonstrate the same relationship of one structure to the other. Landscaping can also be used to help restore the original setting of the station. Before any move of any historic structure is undertaken, the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) should be contacted. Any historic structure listed in the National Register of Historic Places may lose such designation once moved. If a move is absolutely necessary and approved by the SHPO, the move should be conducted by a reliable experienced moving company.

—Ralph Eshelman



At Cape Hatteras National Seashore sandbags used for shoreline protection in front the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse are replaced after a 1994 storm. Photo by Candace Clifford.